

Week 12 - Discipline vs. Punishment and Abuse

"You will never have a greater or lesser dominion than that over yourself...the height of a man's success is gauged by his self-mastery; the depth of his failure by his self-abandonment. ...And this law is the expression of eternal justice. He who cannot establish dominion over himself will have no dominion over others."

~Leonardo da Vinci

As a young mother, I remember my commitment to never punishing my children. It came from having a very harsh, cold, shaming and strict mother, and a punitively withdrawing and shaming father. I decided I would not be like that! So instead I would talk nicely, explain, wheedle, allow myself to be manipulated, coerced into giving more time, more leeway, repeat myself, until I reached the point of taking the wooden spoon out of the drawer, slamming it on the kitchen table and shouting, "I said go and brush your teeth NOW." (for example). At some level, I knew that the child's real need was to brush teeth, eat well, sleep enough - not live in a world of play and fantasy, but I was not sure enough of myself to insist on it when I determined it was time for this to happen. Children don't know and resist doing what they need to do to have a healthy and happy life. A child left to itself would metaphorically eat candy and play all day long.

Or if I asked for some chore to be done and it didn't get done, I would do the other unhelpful thing. Internally I would say, "It's not worth the effort, I may as well just do it myself." I acted the martyr. I failed to consistently insist that when I asked for something to be done, this was in the child's best interests. It was essential to meeting their need for mutual contribution, mutual connection, and being helpful in a family system.

The problem was not the limit. The problem was how long it took me to find the backbone I needed to be the firm, loving parent. I had no idea what that looked like. I vacillated between indulgence and anger. It really was all about me **being afraid of not being loving**, and not about their needs at all. And then I called my fear of not being loving, love.

The problem was that I thought love meant not setting the limit, - it means, no pleading, wheedling, explaining, repeating, asking, teaching, or giving up in frustration and exhaustion. If you know what is best for your child and they do not listen, you find within yourself the love for them to meet the need by taking them upstairs and calmly training them to brush their teeth, every night, until it is habituated (internalized).

How else do they ever learn how to care for themselves in a disciplined way?

So what one inculcates in children is not learning to listening to themselves, not knowing what is best for themselves, not able to lead a disciplined life in terms of doing what needs to be done in a timely way, procrastination to the point of creating inner anxiety. Secondary shame for indulging themselves, when they "know" better. This kind of parenting teaches children to indulge themselves and then shout at themselves to stop, for instance, drinking, eating, playing, not getting work done, following through on what they want to accomplish and doing the things that are life-giving for themselves until it is driven by necessity and shame. Then it gets done driven by fear, shame and with perfectionism. The pendulum swings from indulgence to Shaming. Abandonment to Punishment. Lack of Attention to Judgmentalism.

I console myself that my children are, by any measure highly functioning, normal adults within the culture. But I know that the effects of my unaware and frightened parenting means they have had to embrace struggles in their own inner relationships to themselves. To the extent that this inner dynamic of no limit setting and then

angry limit setting, or giving up on a task altogether, was introjected into them, is the extent to which they now have to embrace the task of re-parenting and now passing this on to future generations in unawareness.

For many of you, who did not have overt and terrible abuse and dysfunction - no violence, alcoholism, divorce, incest.... You are somewhat bewildered as to why you have the struggles you have. After all you came from a "nice, normal," family. You fit in. There were no criminals in your family, no psychopaths. So what is the big deal? Consider the dynamic I describe above and see how much of it applies first to your childhood and then also to your parenting. Can you find the dynamic internally now? If you can, then this is what you were taught.

And now, through seeing this, you have to become the parent who sees the resistance to doing things you do not want to do, i.e. the child in you who is resistant and just wants to live in an internal play world, will not do what you want until you are feeling so much shame about the resistant child, that you force yourself to do it.

So the rule in re-parenting yourself is to listen carefully to the inner war of the child and the mother inside of you.

Eg.

You (Mother/Father) to yourself, "I should really get that closet cleaned out, it is getting out of hand."
The kid in you says, "I don't want to. I want to watch TV."
Mother: "Okay just another hour and then I want it done."
Child: "Okay."

1 hour later

Child: still watching TV and says, "I'm so tired."
Mother: "This is just too much trouble to bother with, maybe tomorrow."

How are you going to set the limit lovingly with you the parent and with you the child?
How are you going to correct the old dialogue?
How are you going to get your need for order and tidiness met?
How are you going to set the limit with the internal child who is indulged, spoiled and self entitled?
How are you going to do this firmly and lovingly, not abusively, knowing that all children need to learn how to be orderly and clean in the world?

Clue: It is simple.

I have chosen simple little examples that are general and universal to every child's life, that everyone can relate too. However, this inner dynamic becomes a principle of life. It is played out internally but also externally with other people and on the job and in your life resulting in a poor quality of life to the extent that it rules you.

In Zen there is a marvellous little story that helped me a lot. A monk at a new retreat center was walking to his room when he saw a bucket and mop on the stairs which were filthy. He looked around for the owner of the bucket and mop filled with judgment as to why this was not getting done. The next day the same thing. The next day the same thing. Finally he complained, where is the worker to clean the stairs and why does he leave his stuff lying around? The head monk replied. The bucket and the mop and the dirty stairs are bothering you. It is yours to do.

This story only makes sense as an internal story. As an external story it could be seen to foster self-righteous martyrdom. The head priest is addressing the inner dynamic.

Remember that what you want and what you need are two very different things. What you want is a tragic tactic and attempt to get an unmet need met. It can never work.

Paradoxically, discipline and limit setting with what does not meet our true needs is a key that unlocks the door to a free life.

“Self-respect is the root of discipline: The sense of dignity grows
with the ability to say no to oneself.”
~Abraham Joshua Heschel

For many of you, you want to focus on the shame of being yelled at or shamed and you can stay in this place for a long time. It makes you feel justified and good and innocent. It exempts you from responsibility. You can tell yourself not to repeat the shaming you once got. You can rise above the shame of being a parent yourself that now indulges and excuses yourself.

Now it is time to look at how you were indulged and excused, your feelings pampered, your wants given in to, and see how much this is internalized into the self-entitlement of the second quadrant. I want what I want when I want it. And find the absent parent who allows this to happen and get that parent to work for the sake of the inner child and it's true needs.

Discipline means disciple-ship. It means following what is True and Loving and is very stern in it's demand for us to lead a loving, truthful life of integrity. It is immovable and constant. You must be the kind of parent that is worthy of the discipleship of the child. You as a parent must be revered, followed, and submitted to. And children do this if you earn their respect through consistent, firm loving limits that are always in their best interests. This dynamic must be achieved within, now.

Exercise:

- Examine your life very carefully and look for where you indulge your feelings and wants at the expense of what you need.
- Examine the ways in which you feel entitled to do what you want and not what you truly need
- Examine the ways in which you want and expect others to do what you do not need to do
- Examine the ways in which you act like a spoiled brat and pout and tantrum if you need to do something you do not want to do
- Examine the ways in which you resist, rebel and get angry at the word discipline, limit, boundary
Children do not like these words. Watch what happens when children do not have limits in the movies;

Lord of the Flies

The Miracle Maker - this is an incredible true life story of the transformation in a child's life (Helen Keller) who has been spoiled and excused because of a disability and has become impossible to live with, into a life of service, love, creativity, political activism, deep insight, and joy.

- Examine the ways in which you blame others for what you have not done for yourself
- Examine the ways in which you excuse yourself for not doing what you need to do
- Examine the ways in which you rationalize, justify and let yourself off the hook for not doing what you need to do
- Examine very carefully how much you indulge what you want instead of meeting your own needs

- Find the resistant child and the indulgent/shaming parent within and write out dialogues to correct the inner dynamic
- Decide on a small discipline, like making your bed every morning, and do it until it becomes habituated. This should have been habituated by age 5 at the latest. You have catch up to do.
- Examine the feeling of self respect, order and internal calmness that ensues from the discipline.

“Discipline isn't about showing a dog (child) who's boss; it's about taking responsibility for a living creature you have brought into your world.

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~Cesar Millan, Be the Pack Leader: Use Cesar's Way to Transform Your Dog . . . and Your Life

Watch Cesar Millan to see how to set limits lovingly! He is marvellous.